A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF ACADEMIC READING PRACTICES AND OVERCOMING STRATEGIES USED AMONG INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This article presents the qualitative findings of a research that investigates the challenges faced by international graduate students with academic reading and the overcoming strategies applied by them in their reading. This qualitative study utilized focus group interviews with 70 international graduate students in postgraduate programs at tertiary level in Malaysia. The findings highlight some important findings for students, academicians and university administrators. The findings indicate that international graduate students do face challenges and problems which are ascribed to the fact that English is the medium of instruction. In addition, the findings also expose the strategies employed by the students to overcome the reading obstacles faced in their academic reading practices. This article concludes with suggestions for administrative policies and reading related programs to assist the academic reading needs of the students.

KEYWORDS: ACADEMIC READING PRACTICE, PROBLEMS, INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS, NON NATIVE SPEAKERS, OVERCOMING STRATEGY

Introduction

The learning experience of international students in English speaking countries has been documented through many studies done over the past decades. These English speaking countries have developed a remarkable popularity among international students from the South East Asian as well as other regions globally. Since the last decade, however, non-English speaking countries where English is the second language (L2), such as Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa have built their reputation as emerging contenders. These countries have also joined the race in attracting foreign students (Crewe, 2004; Reinties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). A very example is the significant increase of postgraduate students from Middle East countries in Malaysia (Norhisham, Muhamad, Azizah, Osman, Abdul, & Norpisah, 2008; Ministry of Higher Education, [MoHE], 2010).

It is obvious that the increasing number of international students studying in Malaysia has made the country a popular choice for higher education. Simultaneously, a human factor that cannot be denied is that these students bring with them different linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds that have been progressively built from childhood, primary, secondary and prior tertiary learning experiences (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). An example is that they have been prepared to conform to culturally defined styles to academic literacies that are associated to their previous education system at first-degree level in their native country. At the same time, the use of their first language (L1) for academic purposes in their prior academic background appear to influence the way they approach academic literacies at graduate level.
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Findings of past second language (L2) academic literacy researches point to the fact that becoming literate in different discourse traditions is a challenging, complex and lengthy process (Zhu, 2001; Casanave, 2002; Shi & Beckett, 2002; Leki, 2003; Spack, 2004; Zamel & Spack, 2004). Another challenge faced by the non-native speakers of English is stress in trying to adjust to new ways of practicing academic literacy in a new education environment in a different country. Empirical evidence based on past research in English speaking universities point toward non-native speakers of English facing obstacles understanding lectures, and reading course books and selected readings (Hellstén, 2002; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Wong, 2004; Sawir, 2005).

Statement of Problem

The medium of instruction for majority of the graduate programs in Malaysian higher education institutions involving international students is English (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman & Mohd Ishak, 2010; Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). However, the non-native, English speaking, international graduate students originate from an academic background whereby their exposure to academic literacies in their native countries has been mainly in their first language. This phenomenon adversely affects the academic literacies practices of these students when they are exposed to the graduate learning environment in Malaysian higher education system in English language.

There appears to be a lack of studies investigating academic literacy practices of international graduate students in Malaysia, where English is the second language and is used as the medium of instruction for graduate studies (Wahi, O’Neill, & Chapman, 2012). Braine (2002) has indicated that “a fundamental shortcoming of most studies of socially situated academic literacy is their focus on writing tasks alone” (p. 63). Braine adds on that less research focuses on other academic practices such as reading and speaking. The already limited research (Rabab’ah, 2003; Hafirza et al., 2004; Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Hisham, 2008; Koo, 2009; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Mahmud et al., 2010; Nambiar & Ibrahim, 2011; Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011a; Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011b) investigating academic literacies practices of international graduate students in Malaysian universities focused mainly on academic writing practices. Findings indicate that the students not only face challenges in meeting the academic demands of their graduate programs but are also grasping with graduate level academic expectations.

Earlier research in global context by Green (1987), Stewart and Spille (1988) and Conrad, Duren, and Haworth (1998) point out the limited literature available on how students grapple with their master’s programs, including those that cover student experiences.

Objectives of the Study

This study which is part of a larger study investigates the academic reading practices and the strategies used by international graduate students to overcome problems in academic reading practices. This is an area that has been less explored in Malaysian higher education. The findings add to the existing literature on academic reading at graduate level in the Malaysian context.

Review of Related Literature

Reading is primarily socially constructed act or practice as it is concerned with meaning in itself. It is largely embedded in social and institutional contexts. According to Alderson (2000), the process of reading brings knowledge to a text. This is because reading as a process includes taking meaning from the text as well as interacting with the text. As such, good reading skills are important for students to comprehend the concepts and subsequently transfer their competency into written and oral
communication activities. Alderson further adds that reading is the foundation of effective analysis, understanding and application. This is because it is central to the subject area.

In relation to the present study, graduates need to have the ability to critically evaluate what they read and use critical thinking to explain their comprehension of what they have read. Atkinson and Longman (2003) have indicated that such an ability in critical thinking is an advantage for the students to locate, arrange, evaluate and choose information wisely through their reading experience. To read academically and employ critical thinking in one’s reading, one should distance from the text in an objective manner to evaluate the validity, biases and assumptions put forward by the authors of texts. As such, the authority of an academically proficient reader is important for successful reading. Without authority, a reader is viewed as powerless (Blanton, 1994, p. 230). This is justified with the need for evaluating and speculating on a text in relation to the reader’s concerns and judgements. Contrarily, a reader’s lack of competence in reading can negatively affect the written and spoken output. This will then have an adverse impact on the essential foundation skill in discussing and writing at graduate level.

In addition, the activity of reading is also related to understanding. Therefore, reading and progressively understanding a discipline specific text requires learning the conventions, norms and standards for compliance. Readers need to create inter-textual links in their reading to produce understanding (Barnett, 1989). Furthermore, according to Olson and Torrance (2009), there exist special conventions and demands that readers need to utilize for different kinds of reading. Therefore, different readers engage differently with written text based on the different historical periods or different cultural contexts. At the same time, readers will be able to overcome the challenges of understanding a text if they are able to read although peculiar words are missing or not known.

Research on Academic Reading Practices

Lack of time is a big issue that influences critical reading among international students as critical reading is time consuming (Borland & Pearce, 1999). This scenario is prevalent among second language learners because additional time is needed to understand the material with consequently less time and confidence available to reflect critically on it. In addition, Durkin (2004) indicated that students also face the dilemma of misinterpreting the concepts of scholarly critical evaluation, concepts of critical reading, the cultural inappropriateness of scholarship, analysing essay questions and differences in the way different cultures structure literary texts. Challenges in reading have been indicated as one of the most neglected problems facing the international graduate students. Burke’s (1996) study with non-native English speakers who are postgraduate Australian students and Borland and Pearce’s (1999) and Cheng, Myles, and Curtis’s studies (2004) with international students whose mother tongue is not English, highlighted new discipline-specific terminology was a major cause of difficulty. International students were also consuming more time to read as it is done slowly. The students also depended extensively on dictionaries and re-reading of a text several times. Phakiti and Li (2011) state that the postgraduate respondents in their study faced difficulty in extracting and synthesizing information from a variety of sources including recognizing and acquiring academic vocabulary for use.

Students’ language background also plays a role in influencing their reading. Interestingly, Koda (1995) study showed that students from different cultural backgrounds where written texts used different orthographic structures (such as Arabic, English, Japanese and Spanish) used different information processing procedures to read English texts. It is, therefore, evident that non-native speakers of English are more disadvantaged than native speakers of English at comprehending what is being read. Thus, Koda warns that the transfer to L2 should not be assumed too readily. There also
exist commonality between Reid, et al., (1998) research finding with Burke’s (1996) that overseas students are also challenged in their ability to read as they take two to three times longer to read an academic text than a student with a background of speaking English. Students unfamiliar with the English-speaking study environment are also linguistically and culturally challenged in ascertaining the degree of how much critical analysis is expected in a discipline, interpreting unfamiliar texts and finally, expressing their criticality in the discourse suitable for a particular discipline.

Unfamiliarity to the discourse patterns used in the written text is a hurdle for international students (Loewy & Vogt, 2000). Furthermore, their vocabulary knowledge may not be broad enough for complete comprehension and requires dictionary use and re-reading. Serious struggle with reading large volumes and time consuming nature of reading combined with poor reading skills impacts the students’ academic success (Wilson, 2003; Pretorius, 2005). Niven (2005) also postulates that academic reading is pre-eminent: it precedes academic writing and determines its depth and quality. Her study highlights that students do not always apply reading strategies that would support comprehension at the required reading level.

Methodology

Research Design

This research focuses on the challenges faced by international graduate students in their academic reading practices. In-depth focus group interviews were employed in this exploratory study to extract detailed and reliable perspectives on challenges faced by the students in their academic reading practices and the overcoming strategies employed to overcome the challenges.

Sampling

The context of this study is a multicultural university setting, with English as the medium of instruction for taught Master programs involving international graduate students. The Institute of Postgraduate Studies section of the research site university in Malaysia provided data on the number of international graduate students enrolled in the Master by coursework and mixed mode programs. There were 203 international graduate students enrolled in the 13 coursework and 11 mixed mode Master programs offered at the 10 faculties of the research site university. Two hundred and three (203) respondents were invited to take part in the in-depth focus group interviews as they fulfilled the criteria for inclusion. The criteria for inclusion of international graduate students in the study are they have to be second semester or later full-time international master students in the coursework or mixed mode Master programs registered at the faculties from the Arts, Hybrid or Sciences.

This qualitative study employed purposive sampling approach as it intended to select all eligible respondents who were able to provide accurate and reliable data (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; 2009) on the challenges they faced in their academic reading practices and how they overcame those challenges.

Focus Group Interviews (FGI)

The primary qualitative data gathering technique used for this study is in-depth focus group interviews (FGI) with the international graduate students. Focus group, a group interview that depends on question-and-answer format (Krueger & Casey, 2000), is applied based on the assumption that people are an important source of information about themselves, their experiences, knowledge, opinions, beliefs, feelings and the issues that affect their lives, and they can articulate their thoughts and feelings (Best & Kahn, 2006).
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The focus groups consisted of three to five respondents per group in line with Krueger’s (1994) “rule of thumb”, which states that a focus group should not be less than three respondents and should not exceed seven participants. This research also used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the respondents and confidentiality of data related to particular respondents. Therefore, a coding scheme was created for coding purposes. The 70 respondents who took part in the FGI were identified according to a number and the faculty they were enrolled in was identified with an alphabet. For example, a respondent is coded as S2A. The symbol S represents the respondent, 2 represents the respondent’s number and A represents the faculty’s code.

The literature review was used as a guide in designing the interview questions for the FGI. Probing for responses far beyond the responses offered by the respondents to the prepared questions was systematically conducted. Questions were framed by dimensions of time: past, present and future. Krueger’s categories of questions (1998) (Table 1) and Krueger’s (1994) (Table 2) focus group data collection flow chart was used as reference.

Table 1. Categories of Questions (Krueger, 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>Participants get acquainted and feel connected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td>Begins discussion of topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Moves smoothly and seamlessly into key questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key</td>
<td>Obtains insight on areas of central concern in the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending</td>
<td>Helps researcher determine where to place emphasis and brings closure to the discussion</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Data collection flow chart of FGI adapted from Krueger (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Flow Chart of the FGI</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing of questions</td>
<td>Opening questions, introductory questions, transition questions, key questions, ending questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capturing and handling data</td>
<td>Audio-taping, field journal notes of researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding of data</td>
<td>Placing codes in the margin of the interview transcript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Checking</td>
<td>Emailing the transcript to the FGI respondents for member checking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seventeen interview groups within the range of three to seven respondents per group were formed and the interviews were administered. Majority of the groups comprised of four to five students. Each interview session lasted between 40 minutes to one hour. In each session, respondents were introduced to the study and given briefing on the purpose of the FGI. Respondents after reading the participation statement sheet were required to sign a consent form informing their research and voluntary involvement.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher at the end of the interview sessions as it increases the reliability and validity of the interview (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). An interview guide was used as a reference to facilitate the interviews. The interview guidelines were adhered to but the respondents were given the opportunity to discuss issues and concerns pertaining to any aspects of the academic reading difficulties.
**Data Analysis**

The transcriptions were analysed using NVivo version 10, a Microsoft Word compatible qualitative data analysis research software. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006), NVivo 10 is helpful for the researcher in moving data easily from one code to another and to memo the data as it was analysed. The coding of the data was done using thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Data was grouped into codes and codes were grouped into broader themes. Table 3 shows the analysis procedures design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) used in this study.

**Table 3 Data Analysis Procedures’ Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Procedures</th>
<th>General Procedures in Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Organizing documents and visual data</td>
<td>Preparing the data for analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Verbatim transcribing of interview (Merriam 1988) text from the FGI. (audiotaped data)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Checking transcription accuracy (e.g. member checking) which functioned to enhance the reliability and validity of the data (Fraenkel &amp; Wallen, 2008).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Preparing the data for computer analysis (Nvivo 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Reading through the data</td>
<td>Exploring the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Writing memos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Developing qualitative codebook to organize data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Coding the data</td>
<td>Analysing the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Assigning labels to codes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Grouping codes into themes (or categories)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interrelating themes (or categories) or abstracting to smaller set of themes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Using qualitative software programs (NVivo 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Representing findings in discussions of themes or categories</td>
<td>Representing the data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Using the researcher, respondents and reviewers’ standards</td>
<td>Validating the data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Employing validation strategies (member checking and peer review)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Note: Qualitative codebook is a statement of the codes for a database (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). It was generated during research and depends on the codes that emerged during an analysis. It helped to organise the data (adopted from Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)].

**Challenges in Academic Reading Practices**

Four sub-themes emerged for the challenges in academic reading practices in English based on the findings of the FGI. The themes are reading duration, medium of instruction in English and lack of discipline content knowledge and translation.

**Reading Duration**

The respondents indicated that more time is needed than the local students in doing academic reading in English language. This also led the respondents to not do academic reading as time taken is very long to read and understand the concepts presented in the texts. The respondents also stated that extended and repeated reading is required to comprehend the meaning of a text. The challenge in their academic reading practices is also due to limited and specified time allocated by their lecturers to read
certain topics before lectures and tutorials. For example, S3D indicated that it took about a month to read and understand a text as comprehension was difficult.

“I know when I finish this article I will understand the issue but the problem is you have not enough time to do this. I think that’s the challenge with reading, not the reading itself.” [S3I]

“when we face with a lack of time in a semester because of a lot of assignments or thesis and it is a big challenge or problem for me...” [S10E]

The respondents also noted that they took more time to understand the ideas in a professional text as they were not familiar with the professional vocabulary used in the text. According to them, students had to read more than twice or thrice to grasp the basic idea. It also depended upon the content of the article or the language used.

“For reading the popular problem I think is the professional vocabulary ...it will take a long time let me to understand so for the professional article I think is most difficult.” [S6C]

Furthermore, not having access to resources for the searching of information from journals for students staying outside of campus through the host institution library delayed the reading process. This facility is actually available for students residing outside campus; nonetheless, without proper information during the literacy orientation by library authorities, students were deprived of the use of the facility.

“One of the most challenge in the first semester, the library its not for outside person. I can’t access when I search on the type of paper, I want to get this paper, I can’t. I use computer from outside, I have to ... got to inside USM, inside main campus I ... especially journal. From 6 months ago I got for computer science students its one of important journal I think it’s a big big problem.” [S10G]

The respondents also stated that they could only focus on their reading in the first hour of initiating reading. Their understanding of the text reading deteriorated as the time progressed and the level of difficulty of the vocabulary in the text increased. Subsequently, they had to seek help from external sources to understand the meaning of the words.

“It requires focusing that’s all and I have problem with focusing because I from reading I try to focus what she said maybe like one hour then I have to do something else then go back to reading. No I cannot keep reading for long hours.” [S1D]

Medium of Instruction in English

Understanding the language and content of the reading material is the most difficult challenge for the respondents whose L1 is not English. The lack of exposure to English language at first-degree level also influenced the reading difficulties faced in the Master programs such as the use of English language to read the academic texts. For example, S10G quoted facing difficulty in reading and understanding the content of articles from reputable journals. Language as a barrier also affected the duration taken to understand the reading.

“because my English is not very good. So I need to read all the chapters before I take the class. So, actually, maybe, I need to spend more time reading chapters than other local students Other local students take 1 hour to finish. I need two or three hours to finish a chapter” [S5D]

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“Here I have to read in English, ... everything in English. In the first semester I have problem in reading but now is better than first semester maybe with the time its better now but.. reading is problem” [S9G]

“reading a high level journal papers like I ... is based on computer science people will use so while I’m referring paper to the (unknown word) paper most highly English words will be used to connecting words and all will be used. High English will be used. We would never use a normal colloquial words so the first time we are seeing that word” [S10G]

Lack of Discipline Content Knowledge

About 20% of the respondents also found reading challenging as it involved the use of technical, specialised or professional vocabulary of their disciplines such as computer science, management, biology, etc. S3E related having no knowledge in the field of tourism field to counter the reading academic challenges in her Masters in Tourism program. This is due to different specialization in her first-degree. S2C quoted that English journal articles contained many “professional academic vocabularies” that could not be understood. S14G stated, “for professional article he has to read like thousand times”. Three respondents from School H indicated that their Master program focused more on the theoretical aspects compared to practical ones. Hence, reading was challenging as learning theoretical based knowledge focuses on doing more intensive reading. S7C expressed that reading in Econometric was a challenge because his understanding of concepts is not clear.

“for me for reading the most challenging part is.. those particular word which related to tourism. I mean as we don’t have any background I mean me. I have no background in tourism so when I come abroad and its related o tourism and you are suppose to know about that before master so it would be challenging because I don’t know so many” [S3E]

Respondents also stated they faced challenges in reading when they encountered words with more than one meaning or multi-meaning words especially verbs. The meaning of the multi-meaning word varies according to a particular field. Furthermore, the challenge of reading an article was also influenced by cultural issues. The content-knowledge of articles that originated from a particular country incorporated cultural specific information into the article.

“something that is English is normal meaning but in Cinema matter, maybe is using like ‘rush’, ‘rush’, like ‘rush’ the meaning in English, its mean crowded or everybody in fast motion or everything is like this, but in Cinema is the negative of the field, they call it, the negative of the film they call it ‘rush’, so I didn’t know that until I come here. Every time I read that, it thought that the company have ‘rushing’ themes, after while I found that the ‘ rush’ mean negative” [S3A]

“Like criticism about the movie. Sometime I couldn’t understand because they explain something inside the other country’s culture, so I couldn’t understand until I read it, several time, I analysis it myself and search for the meaning inside internet, so maybe I can understand clearly what it say”. [S3A]

S6H noted that inability to understand the explanation or instructions when reading statistics related material deprived the student of presenting the correct argument. This at times, was also due to lack of proficiency in English language literacy. The respondents (S1B, S1E, S2E and S2J) related that understanding academic reading done is challenging if they are not familiar with the exact meaning of the words used. S5C stated that her fundamental problem with reading was grasping the meaning of professional vocabulary used in the Economic related journals or articles. In addition, to grasp the message put forward by the writers is most difficult for them.
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“sometimes I don’t know the meaning of some words. I can’t get the whole meaning of sentences.” [S2E]

“very confusing, confusing people, economic is confusing people because if you don’t understand the logic behind the, what the author wants to try to say you can’t understand even the word is easy but you can’t understand the logic so that’s the major problem for me.” [S5C]

“sometimes I read an article thrice and I can’t understand anything it is saying. So I have to repeat it again and again.” [S1B]

Translation

Respondents (S2A, S3D, and S10E) indicated that reading in English is difficult as additional time was taken to read and translate the notes from English into their L1. Difficulty in understanding a text read in English entails translating it into student’s L1 and reading it in L1 for better understanding. In addition, six respondents from School E stated that they faced challenges in reading handouts prepared in Malay language by their lecturers. The respondents had to spend extra time to translate the information in the handouts into English language and then into their L1 to understand the content of the handouts.

“Lecturers, you know it’s not important for them, we are international, we cannot understand Bahasa Malaysia. When they’re talking, you know they say something in Bahasa Malaysia, we cannot understand, actually our lecturers give us notes in Bahasa Malaysia. So it wasted my time, I have to translate in English, then translate to my language. You know, it’s very wasting time. I think they have to you know, it’s important for them to give us in English.” [S6E]

Independent Reading

Students were also burdened with more independent reading due to the actions of lecturers who could not complete the topics in the syllabus of their lectures.

“I think the most difficult, I mean major problem we had was the lecturer introduced a reference he/she wanted to finish the reference completely. He doesn’t know, doesn’t matter we have time or not, he just come and go through the title and he said that, okay if u don’t understand we don’t have time go home and read it and that wasn’t very good ... here they just want to cover the title and the because of this problem it was a little bit difficult but we got this read again.” [S15G]

Overcoming Strategies in Academic Reading Practices

Three sub-themes emerged from the findings of the FGI on the strategies employed to overcome the challenges in academic in reading practices. The themes are improving reading skills, use of resources and reading more academic text in their discipline content knowledge.

Improving Academic Reading Practices
Re-reading is one of the most popular practices among students to better understand the material being read compared to scanning and skimming. 22.9% of the respondents stated that re-reading a particular text patiently with the frequency of two or three times helped them a lot in understanding the idea presented by an author although it is time consuming. However, S4D stated that re-reading twice or thrice only is not sufficient.

“Not just one may be 10 or 15.” [S4D]

“It takes times, sometime maybe our assignment maybe review about article how can you make review articles takes the long times, you maybe take one month to read and to understand try to read, the comprehension is very difficult,” [S3D]

“even if you don’t understand the sentence, but if you just look at it a couple of times, you know you just skim through it, I think we can understand.” [S3I]

S1C added that she is not very familiar with the scanning and skimming skills for academic reading. S3B asserted that exposure to reading many articles helped one to be a good reader eventually. Apart from re-reading an article, S4I stated that memorising the information that is read is also crucial in understanding their reading. In the context of reading movie reviews, S3A states that reading movie reviews to understand the cultural background of the movie can prove to be a setback. Re-reading and doing internet search on the particular cultural based issues in the movie are more advisable in such situations.

“Like criticism about the movie. Sometime I couldn’t understand because they explain something inside the other country’s culture, so I couldn’t understand until I read it, several time, I analysis it myself and search for the meaning inside internet, so maybe I can understand clearly what it say.” [S3A]

According to S2B, the use of WH questions such as “who, what, where, when and why” for self-questioning also helped to understand one’s reading better. Reading leisure material such as novels and magazines also assisted in overcoming the challenges in their academic reading practices. Three respondents switched to reading a more leisurely text when feeling bored while doing academic reading. They, then, continued with academic reading to help them understand better. Furthermore, reading for long hours was found to be not effective in gaining better understanding of the text being read. Resting period between the reading helps before one continues with reading.

“I cannot keep reading for long hours so I have to you know, read for one hour then do another thing then go back.” [S1D]

Another method utilized by S10G to overcome the challenges in academic reading practices is reading the introductory section of a reading text followed by the conclusion section and the proceeding with the content of the text. This reading practice also improved one’s reading speed as well as understanding of the text.

“so now I am understand what’s the whole article is about the content is to say about it and then I have to see the topics and sub topics so what are the things that they are going to say inside the content. So that by using this type of reading methodology we can improve our reading speed and also we can easily understand even first paragraph what the content message that has been given, the author. Second paragraph what the content is. So likewise we can come to know out an easy way is my opinion.” [S10G]
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Use of Resources

Using search engines such as Google also assisted students in understanding their reading material. Eight respondents indicated that by using the Google Translator and online dictionaries, reading becomes less strenuous. For example, firstly, S4D used the Google Translator to translate the article into his mother tongue and then read it. Next, S4D read and tried to understand the original article written in English. Alternatively, S6C searched text with similar ideas in English written in his L1, Mandarin. Reading similar articles in his native language and followed by reading the article in English enabled him to understand the article better.

“first I will search, research in internet I will understand what the series say and second search some similar but is write in Chinese I will first understand what’s the similar article said about and then I will read English and again.” [S6C]

S8G stated that if students faced challenges in understanding the reference material provided by the lecturers, students should search for alternative and similar texts.

“maybe you should start with the handbook, not in the paper or scientific book, maybe start with Wikipedia for example, google and after that you try find the paper because the information in paper or scientific book is so difficult if your first time you start.” [S8G]

Apart from that, six respondents added that using the dictionary or seeking the help of more proficient English speakers helped in their reading. S5E stated that compared to seeking the help of lecturers, using the dictionary is more convenient as it was more difficult to contact the lecturers. However, S7E asserted that seeking the assistance of lecturers also helped in his understanding of the reading material. At the same time, an alternative measure utilized by two respondents from School G was consulting the more experienced senior Master or PhD students on reading techniques. Three respondents also indicated that they consulted other international graduate students for assistance in their reading. In addition, S17G stated that watching videos on reading techniques and skills also helped to improve their reading proficiency. Alternatively, S3G stated that reading information on a particular topic before the lecture helped him to understand his reading material better.

“I have a friend, my countryman and he help me with words that I couldn’t understand” [S3G]

“just read before I came to class, read about the subject that was related and then came to class.” [S3G]

The respondents also indicated that students should be equipped with information on literacy skills to ease their burden in locating suitable reading material.

“So, maybe finding resources is time consuming. Since we have other courses to attend and other courses need reading up as well...so, I think maybe we need go for short course for few few days course of ...actually getting to know how to get...how to access to the correct journals. I think maybe IPS has done...I don’t know. But, to me, the skills that we are lacking is accessing to the correct sources.” [S1B]

Reading More Text in Discipline Content Knowledge

According to respondent S3I, discipline content knowledge is also vital in ensuring that one understands the article read. However, without essential discipline content knowledge, one has to re-read an article with more frequency to ensure understanding. S3G added that focusing on one’s
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research area and intensifying reading were useful as the repetition of common key words eased the understanding of one’s reading. Furthermore, according to respondents S5E and S6E, searching information on Wikipedia allowed them to have access to a wide range of relevant vocabulary. This made the challenging task such as understanding the specific vocabulary and words with multiple-meaning used in the article become easier. Apart from the steps mentioned above, S3D created his own “Vocabulary Bank” which currently has about 200 words. S3D memorised the meanings of the vocabulary from his book as it helped him in his reading when he encountered the particular vocabulary that is relevant to his discipline.

“we cannot say that all the article that we’ve read once, we can understand. So it depends upon the article” [S3I]

“you will see the same.. the key words of your research you will repeat it more than every day you read same sentence same words you will understand” [S3G]

Discussion

International graduate students’ prior academic learning experience and culture to a greater extent influence how they negotiate their current academic reading practices and also their assimilation into the academic community of practice. As supported by Andrade (2008) and Campbell and Li (2008), prior influences have been found to hinder more than assist them in the adaption process to the higher academic expectations in the Master programs. In the context of this study, cultural variations in discourse patterns affect how academic reading takes place in the graduate study. Students involved in the assimilation process into their new academic community of practice need to get accustomed to an unfamiliar culture and to a new education system, as well as navigate these differences in a foreign or L2 which is a lengthy process.

The qualitative results presented in this study indicate the non-native speakers of English who have acquired the required English language qualification to pursue graduate study still faced challenges in academic reading in English. These challenges are known to influence their success in academic literacies practices (Hellsten, 2002; Hellsten and Prescott, 2004; Wong, 2004 and Sawir, 2005). Alco (2008) have highlighted that although international graduate students comply with the required TOEFL or IELTS qualifying results for university entrance, it does not guarantee that these students will not face difficulties with the academic reading practices in their graduate programs.

Secondly, many respondents attested that low proficiency in English language had an adverse effect on their reading fluency and comprehension of the text read. Ringbom (1987: 113-114) and Odlin (1989; 77-80) indicated this phenomenon is caused by language distance between the students’ L1 and L2 or third language, which affects the amount of transfer that occurs between languages. Ringbom further extrapolated that Arabic speakers need an extended period to acquire English vocabulary because transfer from third languages seems to be dependent very much on relative language distance. This scenario negatively affects the students’ English language learning process. However, the students were found to employ certain strategies to overcome the academic reading practices challenges such as putting in more effort, improved and relevant study habits and self-help strategies.

Next, L2 learners tend to read less in English compared to L1 learners as their reading pace is slower. Furthermore, more time is consumed to read and understand the material for critical reflection. Earlier research by Borland and Pearce (1999) indicated the lack of time negatively influences critical reading. This study’s findings indicate students whose L2 is English can take up to three times as long to read
as L1 students, often reading a text over and over to gain understanding. Findings of this study indicate a trend of repeated re-reading to understand a text. This finding is further supported by the findings of a quantitative study (Manjet, 2014) that students overcome the challenges in their academic reading practice by reading the assigned material more frequently. Students who lacked foundation in their discipline content knowledge at bachelor’s level also struggled in their academic reading. Consequently, the students encountered difficulties in many academic reading tasks negotiated in their graduate study.

One of the tactics found to help in their reading is the translation method that improves the familiarity with lexicon in literacy practices. Translation method was employed firstly, to translate texts from English into their native language for easier reading and understanding. Then, the text was re-translated into English again to read and understand. The effectiveness of Google Translator in assisting the students in their other academic literacies practices is also evident in a previous study by Manjet (2015). It indicated that students translated their written work from their first language into English to revise and then re-translate into English.

Unfamiliarity with the academic norms of an English speaking environment also influenced the academic reading practices of international students. In a cognitively demanding environment, the respondents were overpowered by the new discipline-specific terminologies. Therefore, they relied on dictionaries and re-read a text frequently. This presented a new challenge for many international graduate students in their reading and engagement in critical discussions of academic texts with the use of new discipline-specific terminology as indicated by Burke (1996). The dependency on lecture notes is also high and this is further indicated by Van Meter, Yokoi and Pressley (1994) and Harklau (2001) that such a phenomenon adversely affected students’ interest in reading activity.

In addition, Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004) indicated that most students in higher education do not seek assistance in overcoming the difficulties they face in their academic literacies. One of the detrimental effects of this trend is the possibility of students employing their previous academic assumptions, beliefs, values and approaches in their current stage of study as indicated by Schein (2004). This trend is evident as universities do not provide specialized orientation programs geared towards international students’ preparedness for academic study, students’ lack of inability to self-assess their learning needs, disappointment with performance in courses and lack of awareness of what help is available or how to access it (Trotter and Roberts,2006).

Therefore, this research highlights four important recommendations that would ensure international graduate students are not too pressurised by the challenges in the academic reading practices. Firstly, universities need to ensure that international students’ intake is also based on their merit in their English language entry requirement. At the same time, to further ensure that the students are ready to embark on graduate studies in English language, the universities should also impose in-house ruling such as conducting English language placement tests. This will ensure the suitability of the students in enrolling in linguistically or non-linguistically demanding Master programs.

Secondly, teaching and learning through trans-disciplinary collaboration between content and language specialist lecturers should also be promoted. This will lead to effective learning and produce skilled readers (Manjet, 2013). Engaging lecturers from both areas to cross the boundaries of their discipline, collaborate and become familiar with a wide range of disciplines is vital for the students’ academic benefit. Language specialist lecturers need to ensure the students are empowered with effective reading techniques to handle the discipline specific concepts and the language of the particular discipline. Concurrently, the content lecturers should be familiar with the linguistic aspects and the academic reading practice demands of their discipline. The collaboration of lecturers in both areas can nurture
integrative language and content instruction courses to assist the students in meeting the academic reading expectations.

Academic Book Club programs should be encouraged among international graduate students to encourage reading and follow-up critical discussions regularly throughout their study period. These activities will assist in improving the students’ reading frequency and enhance academic socialization with other academic members of their graduate community through discussions. Lastly, intercultural sensitivity and respecting diversity should be made common agenda among lecturers teaching international students. Lecturers should be trained to be more sensitive of the learning habits of these students.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have provided meaningful insights into the challenges of academic reading practices faced by international graduate students and the coping mechanisms employed. The findings indicate that students employ their previous academic reading practices in their current study. This leads to mismatch between the academic expectations of the Master programs and their previous academic study and impose challenges on the students’ current academic reading practices. Therefore, overcoming strategies to handle the challenges in academic reading practices employed by the students need to be complemented with the initiatives by university administrators, academicians and other relevant stakeholders to provide the students a positive academic reading experience.

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